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ABSTRACT

Research suggests that: (1) teachers' use of praise may lower students' confidence in themselves; (2) systematic use of praise as a reinforcer in the classroom is impractical; (3) praise is a weak reinforcer; (4) various forms of praise have different effects on different kinds of students; and (5) use of praise is not the most powerful method for controlling deviant behavior and maintaining student attention. However, research also indicates that there are effective ways to praise students. The term "effective praise," or "encouragement," refers to a teacher's use of positive acknowledgments that neither judge student work nor assign status to the student. Encouragement offers specific, teacher-initiated, and private feedback that focuses on improvement and efforts, uses sincere and direct comments, helps students appreciate their behaviors and achievements, avoids comparisons with others, helps children develop self-satisfaction from a task or product, and does not set the student up for failure. It is concluded that teachers who avoid ineffective praise and use encouragement create a classroom environment in which students do not fear continuous evaluation, can make and learn from mistakes, and do not need to strive to meet someone else's standard of excellence. Nine references are cited. (RH)

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Praise in the Classroom

Randy Hitz and Amy Driscoll

Most educators agree that children need to be in supportive, friendly environments. But recent research indicates that some teacher attempts to create such environments by using praise may actually be counterproductive.

The purpose of this digest is to give teachers new insights into ways to make their statements of praise more effective and consistent with the goals most early childhood educators have for children, namely, to foster self-esteem, autonomy, self-reliance, achievement, and motivation for learning. Most teachers praise students in order to enhance progress toward these goals. However, current research poses the possibility that some common uses of praise may actually have negative effects in some or all of these areas.

Praise: Effects on Self-Esteem and Autonomy

Some praise statements may have the potential to lower students' confidence in themselves. In a study of second graders in science classrooms, Rowe (1974) found that praise lowered students' confidence in their answers and reduced the number of verbal responses they offered. The students exhibited many characteristics indicative of lower self-esteem, such as responding in doubtful tones and showing lack of persistence or desire to keep trying. In addition, students frequently tried to "read" or check the teacher's eyes for signs of approval or disapproval.

In a series of six studies of subjects ranging in age from third grade to adult, Meyer (1979) found that under some conditions, praise led recipients to have low expectations of success at difficult tasks, which in turn decreased the persistence and performance intensity at the task. It seems that certain kinds of praise may set up even the most capable students for failure. No student can always be "good" or "nice" or "smart." In order to avoid negative evaluations, students may tend not to take chances and attempt difficult tasks.

Praise as a Motivator

Many teachers attempt to use praise as a form of positive reinforcement in order to motivate students to achieve and behave in positive ways. However, as Brophy (1981) points out, trying to use praise as a systematic reinforcer in a classroom setting is impractical. Even if teachers were able to praise frequently and systematically, say once every 5 minutes, the average student would still be praised less than once every 2 hours. Brophy's research disclosed the reality that much teacher praise is not deliberate reinforcement, but rather, is elicited by students—the students actually condition the teacher to praise them.

Even if teachers could praise students systematically, there is still some indication that such praise would not be effective. Researchers point out that at best praise is a weak reinforcer. Not all young children are interested in pleasing the teacher, and as children grow older, interest in pleasing the teacher diminishes significantly. Esler (1983) reports that correlations between teachers' rates of praise and students' learning gains are not always positive, and even when correlations are positive, they are usually too low to be considered significant.

Some researchers (Martin, 1977; Stringer and Hurt, 1981) have found that praise can actually lessen self-motivation and cause children to become dependent on rewards. Green and Lepper (1974) found that once teachers began praising preschool children for doing something they were already motivated to do, the children became less motivated to do the activity.

Research demonstrates that various forms of praise can have different kinds of effects on different kinds of students. Students from different socioeconomic classes, ability levels, and genders may not respond in the same way to praise. The use of praise is further complicated by the fact that it may have differential effects depending on the type of achievement being measured. For example, praise may be useful in motivating students to learn by rote, but it may discourage problem solving.

Praise as a Classroom Management Tool

Teachers of young children are especially likely to try to use praise as a way to manage individuals or groups of children. A statement such as "I like the way Johnny is sitting," is often aimed not only at Johnny's behavior but also at nudging children in the group to conform. Teachers of older students would never get away with such control techniques. Even young children who may not be able to articulate their frustration with such blatant manipulation may show their resentment by defiantly refusing to conform or by imitating the "misbehaving" child.

Kounin (1970) did extensive observations in kindergarten classrooms in order to gain insight into effective management practices. He found that smoothness and maintenance of the momentum of classroom instruction and activities were the most powerful variables in controlling deviant behavior and maintaining student attention. Praise did not contribute to effective classroom management.

Praise Versus Encouragement

Research does indicate that there are effective ways to praise students. The terms *effective praise* and *encouragement* are often used by researchers and other professionals to describe the same approach. In this paper, we will refer to both as *encouragement*.

To praise is "to commend the worth of or to express approval or admiration" (Brophy, 1981, p.5). Dreikurs and others (1982) say that praise is usually given to a child when a task or deed is completed or is well done. Encouragement, on the other hand, refers to a positive acknowledgment response that focuses on student efforts or specific attributes of work completed. Unlike praise, encouragement does not place judgment on student work or give information regarding its value or implications of student status. Statements such as "You draw beautifully, Marc," or "Terrific job, Stephanie," are examples of praise. They are nonspecific, place a judgment on the student, and give some indication of the student's status in the group.

Encouragement, on the other hand:

- Offers specific feedback rather than general comments. For example, instead of saying, "Terrific job," teachers can comment on specific behaviors that they wish to acknowledge.
- Is teacher-initiated and private. Privacy increases the potential for an honest exchange of ideas and an opportunity for the student to talk about his or her work.
- Focuses on improvement and efforts rather than evaluation of a finished product.
- Uses sincere, direct comments delivered with a natural voice.
- Does not set students up for failure. Labels such as *nice* or *terrific* set students up for failure because they cannot always be *nice* or *terrific*.
- Helps students develop an appreciation of their behaviors and achievements.
- Avoids competition or comparisons with others.
- Works toward self-satisfaction from a task or product.

Children have an intrinsic desire to learn. Ineffective praise can stifle students' natural curiosity and desire to learn by focusing their attention on extrinsic rewards rather than the intrinsic rewards that come from the task itself (Brophy, 1981). This kind of praise replaces a desire to learn with blind conformity, a mechanical work style, or even open defiance. On the other hand, teachers who encourage students create an environment in which students do not have to fear continuous evaluation, where they can make mistakes and learn from them, and where they do not always need to strive to meet someone else's standard of excellence. Most students thrive in encouraging environments where they receive specific feedback and have the opportunity to evaluate their own behavior and work. Encouragement fosters autonomy, positive self-esteem, a willingness to explore, and acceptance of self and others.

For more information

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